

The Question of National Interest in Iran’s Foreign Policy: A Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

Given that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a nation state with a streak of Islamic-revolutionary transnationalism, the question of national interest has appeared to be quite a perplexing issue for both analysts and researchers of Iranian foreign policy. What lies at the heart of this issue is whether ideology and national interest or, say, idealism and realism can coexist or not. This debate, in turn, revolves around how the term national interest is defined. If it is viewed, for example, through the prism of materialist-rationalist theories, Iran seems, in many cases, to be acting against its own national interests which is—from the perspective of Iranian leaders—not the case. Against this general theoretical background, this article argues for a constructivist interpretation of national interest as an appropriate approach in dealing with the question of national interest in Iran’s foreign policy, arguing that the country’s conception of its national interest is based essentially on its perception of the “Self,” and that it sees no contradiction between its transnational ideological objectives and national interests.

Key Words: Foreign Policy, National Interest, Constructivism, State Identity, Realism, Social Construction.

Introduction

The revolution of 1979 not only abolished the 2500-year-old institution of monarchy in Iran, it also radically altered the identity of the country from that of a pro-western modernizing, along secular lines, state to an Islamic republic under the supreme leadership of a high-ranking cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini. Informed by a particular revolutionary-universalistic reading of Islam by Khomeini and his clerical associates, the IRI, soon after its establishment, showed its concern for transnational issues pertaining to the *ummah* (Muslim community) and the “global oppressed” (*mustaz'afin-e jahan*), defying the Westphalian international system and challenging its major players. It was, however, not that the regime was ready to put the survival of the state at risk by pursuing trans-border Islamic-revolutionary goals and objectives; rather, the preservation of the IR was elevated to the level of one of the most important “rational and religious” duties. This strand of thought—articulated in the early days after the establishment of the IR and survived in the intersubjective-discursive field of the governing elite in Tehran since then—has formed the bedrock of Iran's understanding of its foreign policy.

In Iran's idea of foreign policy national interest is not seen in conventional realist terms; rather, it is framed in an ideological mold. It is, indeed, practically difficult, if not impossible, to prove that Iran's foreign policy decisions and objectives are exclusively or predominantly driven by its religious-ideological precepts, and that geopolitical and economic factors do not play their role in policy-making in Tehran. That said, this article attempts to uncover the meaning that has been imposed on the concept of national interest by the Iranian leaders. In so doing, it has highlighted Iran's perception of the “Self” in explaining what constitutes its national interests. Informed by the constructivist explanation of identity-interest nexus, this article is essentially concerned with how the IRI defines its national interests, not necessarily with the actual conduct of its foreign policy, in

relations to its transnational Islamic-revolutionary ideals and its actual capabilities and constraints.

Theoretical framework

Realism, like liberalism, contends that the international system is anarchic, that is, it lacks a supreme authority to organize and manage interstate relations, and that international politics (in anarchy) is a “struggle for power,”¹ defined primarily in terms of material capabilities. Whether states want power for the sake of power (as classical realists claim) or to ensure security (as neorealist argue), the ultimate and overriding concern of states is survival which makes self-help the “principle of action,”² It was perhaps this understanding on the basis of which Kenneth N. Waltz claimed that states in the anarchic system act identically,³ that is, the differences between states are all about what they possess, not how they function.

As international anarchy creates uncertainties about the survival of states, security, according to realists, becomes their overriding foreign policy goal which pushes them not only to acquire power, but also to manage power rationally, and only those policies which have been conducted in this spirit can serve the national interest.⁴ It implies that states do what they consider is in their national interest, defined as a nation's “egoistic desire for power, security and wealth.”⁵

The concept of national interest⁶ is a central feature of materialist theories of International Relations. A catchword, but vague and slippery, national interest has, however, remained a disputed, if not “undefined,” concept in the materialist theoretical tradition. The concept of national interest is “easily used and abused”⁷ by both political analysts and politicians. Political analysts use it as an analytical tool to reflect on the sources or the adequacy of a country's foreign policy. For politicians, it is a convenient tool to be employed to justify, denounce, or propose policies.⁸ Regardless of how it is used or abused by who, the concept is shroud in

definitional obscurity. The primary reason behind the vagueness of the concept lies in the very fact that it is value-laden.⁹

In contrast to the materialists—also positivist—ontology, constructivists see the world primarily in social terms where ideas matter more than material factors. For constructivists, social world, or more precisely, “social order” is not exogenous to human activity, but a “human product” both in its genesis and its existence at any period of time.¹⁰ The relationship between man (the producer) and his social world (the product) is a reflexive one, that is, man and his social world affect each other in their mutual interaction¹¹ and make each other what they are through a dialectical way.¹² In constructivist ontology, the social world is depicted as “subjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes.”¹³ Ontologically, constructivism is, thus, about the “[social] construction of the social world.” Epistemologically, it is about the social construction of both knowledge and reality.¹⁴

Since both the social world and its reality is constructed socially, “anarchy is nothing.”¹⁵ If it is anything, it is “what states make of it.”¹⁶ It is not anarchy that dictates what states do or should do. Rather, states themselves determine what they should or must do vis-à-vis others, depending upon what kind of role they ascribe to the “Self” and the “Other,”—namely, enemy, rival, and friend—producing, respectively, a Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian culture of anarchy with their respective practical implications.¹⁷

In this light, states do not act under the dictates of anarchy; rather, their actions are informed by intersubjectively-held structures of meanings. It is not that state come together to pursue and maximize their pre-defined interests as materialists argue.¹⁸ On the contrary, how states interact with each other is primarily informed by their intersubjective understanding of the “Self” and the “Other.” This

constructivist assertion suggests that the interests of states are neither predominantly material nor exogenously given and fixed. While accepting that a state's interests form the basis for its action,¹⁹ constructivists view interests as "ideas," that is, "they are ontologically intersubjective but epistemologically objective interpretations about, and for, the material world."²⁰ In simple words, they are intersubjective understandings about what a state wants in the external environment which is, in turn, informed by how policy makers appreciate the world, the international system and the place of their state within it.²¹ It is due to this reason that in each state national interest is mostly understood differently, both in terms of contents and clarity.²² Put differently, each state has a different conception of its national interest with the exception of some commonly agreed "immutable interests" such as survival of the self.²³

As against the realist hypothesis that national interests have material basis, constructivists emphasize the social dimension of national interest and argue that it should be treated as a social construct,²⁴ produced in an intersubjective-social realm of policy-makers. It suggests that one has to direct his/her inquiry towards the process (the state of becoming) to explain how it became possible for policy makers to understand their state's national interest in one particular way, as against many other possible ways.²⁵ In other words, when we talk about the national interest of a state, we actually refer to "a certain kind of idea"²⁶ or a set of ideas which gives meanings to material objects and conditions.

Iran's conception of the "Self": How the Identity of Iran informs its interests

The concept of identity is the central theme in constructivist theory of interest formation. By identity, constructivists refer to the self-

perception of a state. An identity refers to, technically speaking, “relatively stable role-specific understandings and expectations about self.”²⁷ While dividing identity into four kinds, Alexander Wendt has bracketed “personal or corporate” identities of states—and so domestic factor—in his analysis of identity (and hence interest) formation, accepting, nonetheless, that this type of identity is the foundation of other identities.²⁸ For him, it is only through interaction that states acquire an understanding of what they are and what others are.²⁹ Wendt’s systemic-interactive explanation of identity formation has been questioned by a significant number of constructivists. Jutta Weldes, to name as an example, has argued that state officials come to interact with other states with some already held comprehensive and clear conception of the surrounding world and that of the international system as well as the place (real or imagined) of their state within it.³⁰

How a state defines the “Self” is, however, not separated from how it perceives it vis-à-vis (significant) others. The identity of a state is actually a combination of both corporate and social identities as Wendt himself has maintained.³¹ In this way, state identity is a “variable,” which means that it is subject to both internal and external dynamics. It follows that a significant other can affect changes in the contours of a state’s self-perception (identity), albeit working within the limits of that state’s internal identity terrain.³² This, in turn, means that domestic identity politics plays a significant role in constraining or enabling state identity abroad.³³ In other words, a state not only has an identity in relations to others, it also has a “subjectively apprehended” general identity which remains unchanged irrespective of its interaction with an other or others.³⁴ Furthermore, how a state acquires a particular set of identities is subject to which discourses of identity prevail over rival ones. Discourses of identity, however, “do not float freely,” that is, which discourses form state identity is a “function of institutional empowerment.”³⁵

The significance of the concept of identity in constructivism lies in that identity is the mainspring of interests. According to Wendt, what an actor wants presupposes how it views itself.³⁶ Put differently, identities bring with them a specific baggage of interests or preferences with regard not only to policy options in given areas, but also to certain actors.³⁷ As for the systemic level, state identities are abandoned or reproduced, confirmed or modified, radicalized, or moderated in response to the dynamics of world politics.

The constructivist problematique of identity-interest nexus is not as simple as it so appears. It would be so if states had a single, permanent identity with unchangeable ideational-perceptual boundaries. But, the fact is that states are multifaceted political entities, having multiple, often changing identities, and so interests. The constructivist response to this intellectual puzzle is that states activate most identities selectively depending on the situations in which they find themselves.³⁸ The IRI, for example, has multiple (self-perceived) identities such as being “Islamic,” “republic,” “revolutionary,” “anti-hegemonic,” and a third world country. When Iran interacts with, for instance, Russia, it activates its (self-adopted) identity of being an “anti-hegemonic’ state (resisting the American drive for world “domination”), not necessarily that of an “Islamic” state (claiming to be the supporter and defender of the rights of “oppressed” Muslims worldwide).

Moreover, when a state is faced with the dilemma of which identity be activated in a given situation, it may pick up an identity to which it accords a greater degree of commitment and which is more salient among the hierarchically-arrayed identities. In this hierarchical structure of identities some identities are central to the self-conception of states, others secondary or peripheral. This hierarchical structure is, however, not something carved in stone. At times, a secondary and less significant identity which is in great danger by being challenged may overshadow a more significant one which is not threatened.³⁹ Finally, identities demand their reproduction over time. Here again, identities are not of the same

type, that is, some identities easily reproduced while others are difficult.⁴⁰ For the IRI, for example, the identity of being a “third world” country may be easy to reproduce as against that of being an “Islamic revolutionary” one as its reproduction requires a high level of resilience in the face of both (status quo-oriented) regional and international antagonism.

As noted earlier, the “hierarchical structure of identities” is not fixed, that is, which identity or a set of interrelated identities secure the highest position in the hierarchy depends on which discursive construction of the “Self” is empowered by the political system of the state at a given time. In the case of Iran, the political system of the country has, from the very beginning, not only made the identity of being “Islamic” the “master identity,” it also conditioned the relevance of other identities with the former. Iran, thus, gives priority in its foreign policy to preserving its “ontological [or identity] security,” that is, its “Islamic identity.”⁴¹ It is this identity that not only informs national interest, but also comes prior to national interest,⁴² even to physical or territorial security.⁴³ The reason behind an almost obsessive concern of the regime in Tehran for the preservation of the “Islamic” identity of the state is the fact that any negation of this identity may be tantamount to the negation of the “Self” as the latter rests on the former.

Identity of a state as well as that of others (or a significant Other) assumes an authoritative position in dictating interests and choosing options when it becomes reified. When the identity of the “Self” or that of the “Other” is reified, the actor is viewed only as that type,⁴⁴ leaving little room for alternative ways of identification. Why Iran has remained antagonist to the US, despite the fact that normal relations with the latter is highly likely to salvage Iran not only from its economic woes, but also from its strategic isolation, especially in the region. It is due in large part to how Iran sees the “Self” in relation to the US, and vice versa. For Iran, the US is “enemy” of its “national identity”⁴⁵ as well as a “domineering” power submitting to which, according

to President Hasan Rouhani, would be tantamount to “treason” against Islam.⁴⁶

On June 12, 2017, Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of the IRI, accounted the provision of a defined identity to the Iranian nation as one of the most significant achievements of the Islamic Revolution. What is that identity? According to Khamenei, Islam, revolution (of 1979), and historical depth defines the Iranian nation. To him, “Muslim Nature,” “historical depth,” and “revolutionary quality” are the three primary constituent pillars of Iranian identity.⁴⁷ While explaining how and on which basis foreign policy decisions must be formulated, he said:

...national interests should originate from this identity... It is not national identity which should follow national interests... National interests are national interests only when they do not disagree with the national and revolutionary identity of the people of Iran... Everything which reeks of hostility against and detachment from Islam... from the Revolution... and from the historical roots of the people of Iran and everything like this is not part of national interests and cannot be taken into account during decision-making...(sequence of the text is not original).⁴⁸

What we can conclude from the above statement is that the Islamic revolution radically altered Iran's identity, and so its national interests. In other words, the change of identity after the revolution changed the “criteria” for defining national interests,⁴⁹ implying that the national interest of the IR must not only confirm its identity, it must also reproduce it.

Iran's Transnational Ideological Objectives and National Interests: Conflict or Coexistence?

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iran was primarily characterized by the Pahlavi Shahs' romanticized as well as idealized conception of what Shabnam J. Holliday has termed “*Iraniyat*,”⁵⁰ a reference to pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, history, culture, and heritage. As the state had made “*Iraniyat*” the definer of Iranian identity, the Islamic

component of national identity—“*Islamiyat*”⁵¹—was thought irrelevant to the Pahlavi project of making Iran a “great civilization.”⁵² The success of the Islamic Revolution, on the contrary, transformed Iran into a country, defined essentially by “*Islamiyat*,” or, say, “Islamic-ness.” It is, however, not to suggest that “*Iraniyat*” was abandoned altogether in the process of identity construction. Rather, it was selectively employed in the process in a way that it could not contradict or negate the Islamic component of identity. To put in a general way, the conflicting elements of “*Islamiyat*” and “*Iraniyat*” were synthesized by the revolutionary elite in Tehran in such a way that it produced what an author has termed “religious nationalism.”⁵³

After the revolution, Iran was declared an Islamic republic whose survival and security became, to quote Khomeini, one of the “most important rational and religious obligation which nothing can hamper.”⁵⁴ This strand of thought has made the principle of *maslahat*⁵⁵ (expediency)—introduced in Islamic Jurisprudence by Imam al-Ghazali—a central element of policy-making in Tehran. This principle has given a great measure of flexibility to Iranian policy-making elite. One can interpret the principle of *maslahat* (*maslaha* in Arabic) a veiled reflection of Machiavellian realpolitik, the Iranian leaders view it as an arbiter in cases where internal/external reality clashes with the country’s constitutional principles of foreign policy. In such cases Iran juxtaposes its actual capabilities and internal/external constraints with its principles while taking into consideration the expediencies of the Islamic system. If it come to the conclusion that acting upon the principles may endanger the survival of the system, it gives priority to the later since the “interests of the system [in Islam] is among the issues which take precedence over anything else.”⁵⁶

According to the principle of *maslahat* Iranian policy makers can solve any foreign policy problem from the standpoint of Islam by referring it to the expediency of the system. In the words of Rafsanjani, “we can choose our expediency on the basis of Islam.”

According to him, to put Iran in danger “on the ground that we are acting on an Islamic basis is not at all Islamic.”⁵⁷

It is under this intersubjective understanding that the Iranian leadership does not see any conflict between “idealism” (seeking and pursuing the fulfillment of the ideals of the revolution as enshrined in the constitution of the IRI) and “realism” (acting on and coming to terms with both domestic and external realities; not “political realism”). On June 24, 2010, Khamenei told government officials that there was “no contradiction between realism and idealism,” that is, between seeing the existing domestic and international realities and pursuing the “ideals and wishes” of the nation. While maintaining that idealism was not fantasy, he strongly rejected the notion of the incompatibility between “idealism” and “realism.”⁵⁸ This approach to foreign policy implies that policy-makers should keep the “ideals [of the Islamic revolution] in mind,” but at the same time they must “take the existing realities into consideration and move towards the ideals one step at a time.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

Much like individual human beings, every state in the international system has certain needs and wants with respect to both its own society and the external world which form the basis of its foreign policy. These needs and wants, in turn, constitute what is conventionally called as “national interest(s).” To this point, there is hardly any difference between states. What marks a state off from any other state is the way it defines its national interests. The interests, for example, of a super power may be different from a middle power as the former, besides what the latter strives for, aspires to maintain its global “hegemony” or the leadership of a particular bloc of states. It is, perhaps, this reason that constructivists have theorized national interest as an intersubjective-social construct, informed primarily by policy-makers’ perception of the “Self” (identity) as well as its place, role, and responsibilities in the international arena. Constructivists,

hence, reject the materialist interpretation of the concept, and emphasize the need to treat it as a social phenomenon.

As stated above, the Islamic Revolution not only overthrew the Pahlavi Regime, it also transformed Iran into an Islamic republic which, from the very beginning, embarked upon a process of “Islamizing” everything within its ambit, including its foreign policy. In the course of “Islamizing” foreign policy—framing the country’s foreign policy on the basis of “Islamic criteria,” as Article 3 of the constitution of the IRI states—Iran also “Islamized,” at least in principle, its national interests, that is, Islamic precepts were given central position in defining the country’s national interests. This, in turn, was necessitated by the country’s identity as an Islamic republic, founded upon a particular reading of Islam which was revolutionary-emancipatory as well as anti-hegemonic and universalistic. The concern for the safety and security of the IR was, however, not lost in such a transnationalism; rather, it was made an overriding, not contributing, factor of policy-making. It is against this backdrop that this article has argued that in Iran’s conception of foreign policy there is no conflict between its transnational ideological objectives and national interests as the fulfillment of the former is intersubjectively considered that of the later, and vice versa. To recapitulate and conclude, in Iran’s understanding of foreign policy identity of the state, as defined by the regime, and its interest are bound by a co-constitutive relationship, that is, the former serves as the basis for the later and the later reproduces the former. Any major breakup of the relationship—provided that the regime views so—has the potential to change the course of Iran’s foreign policy with far-reaching effects.

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